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ABSTRACT

In seeking to expand research on the actual effects of diversity on college students, this study investigated whether various multi-cultural and feminism-related variables at the individual, peer, and institutional levels significantly influenced educational degree ambitions among women. The study used data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program 1985 Freshman Survey and 1989 Follow-up Survey as well as data gathered through a national 1989-90 Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) Faculty Survey, 1989 HERI Survey of Registrars, and the Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS) of Opening Fall Enrollments. The national survey reached 15,050 students attending 392 four-year colleges and universities. The study used the "Input-Environment-Outcome" methodological framework which controls for students' background characteristics in order to examine the effects of college environmental variables on a particular outcome. This study's dependent variable was a student's graduate degree aspirations. The study found that certain forms of diversity promote increased degree aspirations for white and minority women. It found that, though diversity variables at the institutional or peer level were less important, those that occurred at the individual level were important. These included a sense of feminism, the acts of socializing with someone of a different ethnic group, discussing racial/ethnic issues, and taking a course in women and gender studies. The appendix contains a list of regression variables. (Contains 10 references.) (JB)

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Boosting Female Ambition:

How College Diversity Impacts Graduate Degree Aspirations of Women

by

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While there has been much attention and debate on issues of diversity on American college campuses, there is relatively little systematic and formal research on the actual effects of diversity on students. This study investigates whether various multicultural and feminism related variables at the individual, peer, and institutional level significantly impact educational degree ambitions. Study findings indicate that certain diversity experiences at the individual level increase white female's and minority female's graduate degree aspirations. Moreover, these types of activities are not confined to the classroom context.

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This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Marriott Hotel, Orlando, Florida, November 2-5, 1995. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

In recent decades there has been growing effort by the American higher education system to promote diversity. In response to reform calls to increase access for those traditionally turned away from mainstream higher education, colleges and universities have increased their enrollment of both women and racial minorities. Yet, entrance alone is insufficient. Recognizing a responsibility to provide a non-alienating environment to such students, institutions that formerly catered to a predominantly white male student population began promoting multicultural and feminist related changes (e.g., expanding curriculum to include women and gender studies, and ethnic studies; recruiting more female and minority faculty and administrators). Efforts of this nature, however, have been accompanied by little systematic investigation of the ensuing consequences on college students. For instance, because facets of both multiculturalism and feminism involve consciousness raising and self-empowerment, can we expect female and minority students who attend colleges more oriented toward multiculturalism and feminism to become more ambitious than peers who do not? Such a possible benefit from diversity deserves proper study.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

The drive towards diversity has achieved greater momentum in recent years. Levine and Cureton (1992) recently surveyed 196 colleges and universities to measure the extensiveness of multiculturalism on American campuses. Among the findings are that at least a third of these institutions are offering course work in ethnic or gender studies; more

than half have introduced multiculturalism into their departmental course offerings; more than half are seeking to achieve a more multicultural faculty; more than a third have multicultural centers and institutes; and, multiculturalism in the curriculum is a major issue of concern on campuses across the country.

Despite the growing prevalence of multicultural and feminist related changes on American campuses, there remains little research measuring the effects on students. According to Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) most of the research on degree aspirations tend to examine precollege characteristics of students (e.g. students arriving at college more well-prepared, from high SES backgrounds, and more motivated tend to graduate with higher degree aspirations), the greater resources of selective and prestigious institutions (which allow them to attract students with greater initial degree aspirations), and strictly academic related factors (e.g., college grade point average).

Nonetheless, research results from numerous studies do suggest that feminism and multiculturalism positively affect students' self-esteem. For instance, Bliss (1988) finds that children of feminist parents see themselves as more independent, active, aggressive, strong, and unafraid, and were more free of sex-role occupational stereotypes. A study by Usher and Fels (1985) reveals that middle-aged women who score high on the feminism dimension have significantly higher self-esteem than those scoring low on this dimension. Studying French-Canadian women (identified as feminists and nonfeminists) and French-Canadian men, de Man and Benoit (1982) find that males and feminists have higher self-esteem than nonfeminists. A study by Weitz (1982) reveals that feminist consciousness raising is likely to increase the self-esteem of women. Funkand, Peterson,

and Trent (1973) found that taking ethnic studies courses leads to significantly better attitudes toward school among students. In *Women's Studies Graduates*, Reuben and Strauss (1980) review a number of studies examining the effects of women and gender studies. Study findings generally reveal that while taking a one semester course in women's studies does not increase career aspirations, it does heighten students' awareness of sex roles, sex stereotypes, and discrimination.

Astin in *What Matters in College* (1993) reports that among the factors that positively affect students' degree aspirations are diversity activities such as discussing racial or ethnic issues, socializing with students from different racial or ethnic groups, participating in campus demonstrations, attending racial or ethnic workshops, and taking women's studies or ethnic studies courses. Astin's results are generalized for the college population since the effects for individual subgroups varying gender and race are not investigated.

OBJECTIVES

Multicultural and feminism related changes on college campuses need to be accompanied by study of their consequences, especially those directly affecting students. If these diversity factors do indeed enhance self-esteem in racial minority students and female students, then can we expect this to translate into heightened academic aspirations? And if so, what are the specific *types* of multicultural and feminist related experiences that

affect students' degree aspirations? Would the effects be comparable across subgroups of the population? This study intends to explore such questions through examining an array of feminist and multicultural environmental factors at the individual, peer, and institutional level that can potentially affect the degree aspirations of white college women as compared to minority college women.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The data utilized in this study comes from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program 1985 Freshman Survey and 1989 Follow-up Survey, sponsored by the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) and the American Council on Education. Additional data is gathered through the 1989-90 HERI Faculty Survey, the 1989 HERI Registrar's Survey, and HEGIS Opening Fall Enrollments. Survey data is gathered at the national level, reaching 15,050 students (8,997 women; 6,053 men) attending 392 four-year colleges and universities.

Research Methods

This study adopts Astin's "Input-Environment-Outcome" (IEO) methodological framework which emphasizes that in order to discern properly the effects of college environmental variables on a particular outcome, students' background characteristics

must first be controlled. This approach will yield the true effects of those multicultural and/or feminist related factors that increase women's degree aspirations.

The statistical analysis section begins by reviewing educational trends through comparison of simple group statistics. A round of blocked stepwise regression analyses will identify those feminist and multicultural factors that significantly predict graduate degree aspirations for white women and minority women. Comparison of the ***standardized regression coefficients*** (betas) within a regression will allow us to determine the relative predictive power of the significant variables within each sample. Additionally, a second round of regressions is conducted so that an intergroup comparison of the ***unstandardized regression coefficients*** (b's) reveals the relative degree by which each significant factor affects white women as compared to minority women.

Variables

The dependent variable employed in this study is *student's graduate degree aspirations in 1989*. The degrees falling under the "graduate degree" category are M.A., Ph.D, Ed.D, M.D., D.O., D.D.S., D.V.M., J.D., LL.B., B.D. and M.Div. In accordance with the I-E-O methodological model, the variables examined in this study are assigned to one of three blocks representing the temporal sequence by which such variables could affect the dependent variable. The three consecutive blocks are (1) student's background characteristics, (2) college environment characteristics, and (3) student's college experiences. (See Appendix for a complete list of regression variables).

Student input variables, those background characteristics measured at the time of college entry in 1985, include *parental income*, *mother's level of education*, *SAT score*, *academic self-concept*, *graduate degree aspirations*, and *level of feminism*. The feminism variable is derived from student agreement with equal opportunity for women. Possible student self-reported responses are (1) disagree strongly, (2) disagree somewhat, (3) agree somewhat, and (4) agree strongly.

Measures of college environment consists of such institutional variables as *institution type* (public university, public college, private university, or private college) and *institutional selectivity* (mean study body SAT score). Also included are the peer factors of *peer multiculturalism* (peer responses to the statement "students of different background communicate") and *peer feminism* (peer responses to the statement "equal opportunity for women" and "married women should stay home"). Other college environmental variables include such multicultural and feminist related institutional variables as *diversity of student body* (percent of minorities in the student body), *institutional multicultural orientation* (individual responses to the statements "faculty sensitive to issues of minority students," "a college priority is to recruit more minority students," "a lot of trust between minority students and administrators," and "a college priority is to create a diverse multicultural environment"), *percent of female faculty*, and *institutional feminist orientation* (individual responses to the college description "many courses include feminist perspective").

Environment variables also include such diversity related student experience measures as *enrolling in ethnic studies course*, *attending racial/cultural awareness*

workshop, discussing racial/ethnic issues, socializing with someone of different ethnic group, enrolling in women and gender studies course, and *level of feminism in 1989*. Finally, in order to ascertain properly the effects of the diversity variables two important non-diversity related student experience variables, that of *college gpa* and *student-faculty interaction*, are included in the regression.

RESULTS

General Trends

Interestingly, at the time of college entry women are less inclined to have graduate degree aspirations than men. Four years later, however, women surpass men on this dimension (see Table 1). Hence, during college men and women appear to undergo a markedly different degree of change on this particular outcome.

Table 1.
Changes in Graduate Degree Aspirations for Men and Women during College
(Men *n* = 7,691; Women *n*= 11,197)

	Men	Women	Overall
Graduate degree aspirations in '85	62.1%	56.7%	58.9%
Graduate degree aspirations in '89	67.8%	71.5%	70.0%
Difference	5.7%	14.8%	

Looking closer at the female sample we find that at the time of college entry minority women are more inclined to have graduate degree aspirations than white women. white women, however, make a greater gain while in college and consequently four years

later trail only slightly behind minority women on the measure of graduate degree aspirations (see Table 2).

Table 2.
Changes in Graduate Degree Aspirations for White Women and Minority Women during College (White Women *n* = 9,943; Minority Women *n*= 1,254)

	White Women	Minority Women	Difference
Graduate degree aspirations in '85	55.6%	65.3%	9.7%
Graduate degree aspirations in '89	71.6%	73.5%	1.9%
Difference	15.6%	8.2%	

To test whether white and minority females as compared to the rest of the college attending sample are more likely to have graduate degree aspirations four years after college entry, the dummy variables of white female and minority female are included in a regression in which the dependent variable is that of having graduate degree aspirations in 1989. Also in this regression are some non-diversity related background characteristics (SAT score, family income, mother's education, self-rated academic ability in 1985, advanced degree aspirations in 1985), non-diversity related college environment variables (institution type and selectivity), and non-diversity student experience variables (college gpa and student-faculty interaction). The regression results reported in Table 3 indicate that above and beyond the control of the aforementioned variables, gender and minority status both have significant predictive effects on the dependent variable at the .001 significance level.

Table 3. Non-Diversity Related Predictors of Graduate Degree Aspirations in 1989 (Standardized Regression Coefficients, N=12,296)

Variable	Simple r	Beta After Inputs	Final Beta
Input Characteristics			
Advanced degree aspirations in 1985	.24	.18***	.16***
SAT score	.22	.13***	.05***
White female	.03	.09***	.05***
Minority female	.02	.07***	.06***
Mother's education	.13	.05***	.04***
Self-rated academic ability 1987	.19	.07***	.03*
Family income	.09	.03**	.02
College Environments			
Institutional selectivity	.20	.07***	.08***
Private college	.06	.05***	.13***
Public college	-.05	.01	.11***
Private university	.07	.00	.11***
Public university	-.06	-.05***	.09***
College Experiences			
College gpa	.24	.17***	.15***
Student-faculty interaction	.19	.15***	.12***

Note: Variables listed are those that entered the regression equation at $p<.05$
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

The remainder of this study is an attempt to determine whether multicultural and feminist related variables have any predictive effect on the graduate degree ambitions of white and minority college women.

Do Multicultural and Feminism-related Factors Matter for White Women?

Multiple regressions are conducted to determine which, if any, multicultural and feminism-related factors affect female degree ambitions. Tables 4 and 5 summarize the results of the regression analyses, displaying for each variable that enters the regression simple correlations and standardized regression coefficients. Standardized regression

coefficients are derived by equating the variance of all regression variables, thus allowing for meaningful coefficient comparisons within one regression equation. The "beta after inputs" column shows the effect of each variable after students' background characteristics have been controlled. And the "final beta" column shows the effect of each variable after various student's background characteristics, college environmental variables, and college experience variables have been controlled.

Table 4 shows that for the white women sample graduate degree aspirations in 1985 (the pretest for the outcome variable in this case) is the strongest predictor of student's graduate degree aspirations in 1989. With regard to significant background characteristics we find that those with high academic self-concept in 1985, a highly educated mother, and a high sense of feminism in 1985 are likely to experience an increase in degree ambitions. We find that the college environmental variables of attending a selective institution, a public college, and a private university all tend to boost white women's degree aspirations. While looking at college experiences, the variables of earning high grades in college, interacting with faculty, socializing with someone from a different ethnic group, possessing a high degree of feminism in 1989, and taking a women and gender studies course all heighten degree aspirations.

Interestingly, SAT score was significant before college environmental variables were introduced. Specifically SAT score became insignificant at the step in which institutional selectivity entered the regression. This implies that those with high SAT scores are likely to experience an increase in degree aspirations because they tend to attend selective institutions, which exerts a positive effect on the outcome variable in this

case. Moreover, institutional multicultural orientation is significant until student-faculty interaction enters the regression. This suggests that white women attending institutions high on multicultural orientation experience an increase in degree aspirations because such institutions are those in which they tend to interact more with faculty.

TABLE 4. Predictors of Graduate Degree Aspirations for White Women (Standardized Regression Coefficients, N = 7,113)

Variable	Simple r	Beta After Inputs[a]	Final Beta
Input Characteristics			
Graduate degree aspirations in 1985	.25	.19***	.17***
Academic self-concept 1985	.19	.10***	.04**
Mother's education	.14	.08***	.05***
SAT score	.17	.06***	.00
Feminism in 1985	.08	.05***	.03**
College Environments			
College selectivity	.20	.10***	.10***
Public university	-.08	-.07***	.01
Institutional multicultural orientation	.08	.07***	.01
Public College	-.04	.01	.06***
Private University	.07	.02	.03**
College Experiences			
College gpa	.22	.16***	.14***
Student-Faculty Interaction	.21	.17***	.14***
Socialize with someone from different ethnic group	.12	.08***	.04***
Feminism in 1989	.06	.03**	.03*
Taken women and gender studies course	.10	.06***	.03*
		(R^2=.15)	

Note: Variables listed are those that entered the regression equation at p<.05

[a]In the Beta After Inputs the coefficients corresponding to college environment and college experience characteristics represent the standardized regression coefficient that that variable would have received had it entered at the step immediately after inputs are controlled.

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Do Multicultural and Feminism-related Factors Matter for Minority Women?

Referring to Table 5 we find that for the minority women sample having graduate degree aspirations in 1985 and having a highly educated mother are both predictors of graduate degree aspirations in 1989. In terms of college environments, only student body diversity is significant. The negative coefficient indicates that minority women who attend institutions with fewer minorities are more likely to experience an increase in degree aspirations. With regard to college experiences we find that high college grades, discussing racial/ethnic issues, and taking a women and gender studies course all boost graduate degree ambitions.

Interestingly, academic self-concept in 1985 is significant till student body diversity enters the regression. This implies that minority women who have high academic self-concept tend to experience an increase in degree aspirations because they are less likely to attend institutions that are racially diverse (which exerts a negative effect on the outcome variable in this case). Furthermore, peer feminism is significant until college gpa enters the regression. This suggests that minority women who attend institutions with high peer feminism are more likely to experience an increase in degree aspirations because they tend to be those who perform well academically (i.e., have high college gpa).

TABLE 5. Predictors of Graduate Degree Aspirations for Minority Women (Standardized Regression Coefficients, N = 860)

Variable	Simple r	Beta After Inputs[a]	Final Beta
Input Characteristics			
Graduate degree aspirations in 1985	.22	.18***	.15***
Mother's education	.18	.14***	.08*
Academic self-concept	.14	.07*	.00
College Environments			
Student body diversity	-.17	-.12***	-.07*
Peer feminism	.17	.10**	.03
College Experiences			
College gpa	.23	.18***	.17***
Discussed racial/ethnic issues	.17	.12***	.09**
Taken women and gender studies course	.17	.13***	.07*
		(R^2=.14)	

Note: Variables listed are those that entered the regression equation at p<.05

[a]In the Beta After Inputs the coefficients corresponding to college environment and college experience characteristics represent the standardized regression coefficient that that variable would have received had it entered at the step immediately after inputs are controlled.

*p < .05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Significant Common Factors for Both White Women and Minority Women

There are four variables that significantly affect both white women's and minority women's degree aspirations. A comparison of the unstandardized regression coefficients reveals that for the white women sample and the minority women sample the positive effects of graduate degree aspirations in 1985, mother's level education, and college gpa are generally comparable. The effect of taking a women and gender studies course, however, appears to be larger for minority women than white women.

Table 6. Common Predictors of Graduate Degree Aspirations in 1989 for White Women and Minority Women (Unstandardized Regression Coefficients)

Variables	White Women	Minority Women
Graduate degree aspirations in 1985	.14	.16
Mother's education	.01	.02
College gpa	.07	.07
Enrolled in women/gender studies course	.03	.06

Significant Diversity Factors for White Women and/or Minority Women

In summary diversity variables have a significant impact on the graduate degree ambitions of white women and minority women. The only diversity variable found to exert a negative effect is that of student body diversity (for the minority women sample). One possible explanation for this curious finding is that perhaps minority students attending institutions that are not racially diverse may become more conscious of a need for greater minority participation in higher education, thus themselves becoming more motivated to pursue graduate studies.

The single diversity factor enhancing the degree aspirations of both white women as well as minority women is that of taking a women and gender studies course. Additionally, white women possessing a high sense of feminism (both at 1985 and 1989) and those inclined to socialize with someone of a different ethnicity tend to increase their educational aspirations. Meanwhile, minority women who discuss racial/ethnic issues are likely to become more educationally ambitious.

Table 7. Comparison between White Women and Minority Women of Variables Predicting Graduate Degree Aspirations in 1989

White and Minority Women	White Women	Minority Women
Input Characteristics		
Graduate deg aspirations '85 (+)	Feminism in 1985 (+)	
Mother's education (+)	Academic self-concept (+)	
College Environments		
	College selectivity (+)	Student body diversity (-)
	Public college (+)	
	Private university (+)	
College Experiences		
College gpa (+)	Stud/fac interaction (+)	Discuss racial/ethnic issues(+)
Taking women/gender st. course(+)	Feminism in '89 (+)	
	Socialize w/ someone of different ethnic group (+)	

To confirm the effect of certain diversity related variables on white women's and/or minority women's graduate degree aspirations in 1989, another regression is run for the overall sample, this time including non-diversity related as well as diversity related variables. Table 8 shows that after controlling for background characteristics white and minority females remain significantly more likely to have graduate degree aspirations in 1989. This positive predictive effect for white females, however, disappears after one controls for diversity variables. In particular the dummy variable white female becomes insignificant after feminism in 1989 is entered into the regression. This result suggests that for white women it is one's sense of feminism rather than one's gender that drives their degree aspirations. And although final regression results show that the minority women dummy variable remains significant, a look at the change of its regression coefficent

through each step of the regression reveals that after diversity variables are introduced the predictive power of this variable declines and would fail to be significant at the .01 significance level.

Table 8. Non-Diversity Related and Diversity Related Predictors of Graduate Degree Aspirations in 1989 (Standardized Regression Coefficients, N=8,917)

Variable	Simple r	Beta After Inputs	Final Beta
Input Characteristics			
Graduate degree aspirations in 1985	.25	.19***	.17***
SAT score	.22	.12***	.04**
Mother's education	.15	.07***	.05***
White female	.02	.07***	.02
Minority female	.02	.05***	.03*
Academic self-concept in 1985	.19	.06***	.03*
Feminism in 1985	.07	.02*	.01
College Environments			
Institutional multiculturalism	.07	.06***	.01
Institutional selectivity	.20	.07***	.07***
Public university	-.06	-.05***	.11***
College Experiences			
Percent of female faculty	.01	.04***	.03*
College gpa	.23	.16***	.14***
Student-faculty interaction	.19	.15***	.12***
Socialize with someone of different ethnicity	.13	.08***	.05***
Attend racial/cultural awareness workshop	.14	.09***	.04***
Feminism in 1989	.08	.04***	.03**
Public college	-.06	.01	.13***
Private university	.08	.02	.14***
Private college	.06	.04***	.13***
Institutional feminism	.06	.06***	-.02*
Enrolled in women and gender studies course	.09	.05***	.02*

Note: Variables listed are those that entered the regression equation at $p<.05$
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

LIMITATIONS

Among the limitations of this study is the uneven number of subjects in the comparison groups. In comparing regression results it would be preferable to have attained more comparable sample sizes. In this case this was not feasible given the desire to maximize sample sizes for each group. Furthermore, there are the inherent limitations of using a pre-existing survey in so far as one is limited to employing only those variables which are pre-selected by another party. A wider array of feminist college experience variables (participating in women's center, joining all women's sports team, frequency in discussing women/gender issues) from which one can further decipher how feminism boosts the degree ambitions of white women would be preferred. In addition, a parallel multicultural measure to feminism (e.g., a measure for racial egalitarianism) would have improved the study.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A general finding of this study is that certain forms of diversity promote increased degree aspirations for white and minority women. The nature of this diversity encompasses both feminist and multicultural factors. Interestingly, these diversity variables are those not at the institutional or peer level, but rather those which occur at the ***individual level*** (one's sense of feminism, and the acts of socializing with someone of a different ethnic group, discussing racial/ethnic issues, and taking a women and gender studies course). Moreover, these factors are not those that are necessarily confined to the classroom context. School officials who want to promote the educational ambitions of

women at their institutions can seek not only to promote the taking of women and gender studies courses, but to provide more opportunities for students of diverse ethnic backgrounds to socialize with one another and to discuss racial/ethnic issues.

Finally it most be noted that although the total R-square values for each sample was in the modest vicinity of .15, this is of little importance given that the dependent variable is a complex outcome. This contention is supported by the fact that pre-tests are generally the strongest predictors of post-test outcomes, yet in this case degree aspirations in 1985 only accounted for .06 and .05 of the variance in degree aspirations in 1989 for the white female and minority female samples respectively. What ought to be of salience is the finding that above and beyond those variables that are commonly expected to impact degree ambitions (e.g., initial graduate degree aspirations, mother's level of education, academic self-concept, college selectivity, and college gpa), certain multicultural and feminism related factors further enhance female educational aspirations. Finally, the choice of this study to examine one particular outcome of diversity is in no way intended to suggest that this is the only nor most important effect of diversity. This study merely attempts to offer insight into the infrequently studied relationship between multicultural and feminism related college environments and an important attitudinal measure in students.

APPENDIX

List of Regression Variables

Non-Diversity Variables

SAT score
Income
Mother's education
Academic self-concept 1985
Advanced degree aspirations 1985
Institutional selectivity
Private college
Private university
Public college
Public university
College gpa
Student-faculty interaction

Multicultural related:

Peer multiculturalism
Institutional multiculturalism orientation
Taken ethnic studies course
Student body diversity
Attended racial/cultural awareness workshop
Discussed racial/ethnic issues
Socialize with someone of different ethnicity

Feminism related:

Peer feminism
Institutional feminism
Taken women/gender studies course
Percent of female faculty
Student feminism 1985
Student feminism 1989

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